

## **MONORAIL: TIME FOR AN EXIT STRATEGY**

When the dream becomes a nightmare, it's time to wake up.

For seven years, people in Seattle have dreamed of a cost-effective, sleek, modern train crisscrossing the City. People were frustrated by how slow this area has been to develop mass transit. As a committed transit supporter, I shared that frustration.

As the Seattle Monorail Project slowly chipped away at that dream, however, I became increasingly alarmed at rising costs and declining performance. Over the last three years my questions have remained unanswered and my fears have increased.

Astonishingly, the current proposal is worse than any I had feared. I cannot, in good conscience, vote to approve a financial plan that will saddle Seattle taxpayers with an \$11 billion burden, that will jeopardize the City's financial health, and that the State Treasurer and Auditor believe could harm the whole region's ability to finance many other projects.

I had imagined that the SMP would come up with a poorly-designed, clunky system that would be within budget but would lead to neighborhood blight and never realize its promise of a system that would serve the whole city. Or, I thought, the SMP would come up with a better-designed system, but one that was just not affordable.

I never dreamed that they would propose a system that combined the worst features of both scenarios: incredibly high costs and financial risks along with poor design.

A system that will take until 2050 to be paid off – even in the optimistic SMP scenario – will never have the financial wherewithal for extension and expansion, killing the dream that began this quest.

With our region facing urgent priorities in replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the 520 Bridge, and with Sound Transit's light rail under construction with a realistic budget, but lacking the funds to complete the first phase to Northgate, we cannot afford to spend these kinds of sums on the project that SMP is now proposing.

It is time for an exit strategy. There are three possibilities:

1. The SMP Board could vote to reject this contract (as at least one member has already suggested). They could look for alternatives – rebidding, with more than one competitor, might result in a more affordable contract. Or the Board could follow the Sound Transit model, recognize that it can only afford to do part of the system, and try to complete one leg (preferably the one from West Seattle to downtown, the easiest and most useful part of the route), in hopes that success with that would persuade the voters to vote more funding for the rest of the system.
2. If the SMP Board does not do this, then the City Council could refuse to agree to the financial plan, thus denying SMP the right to use City streets. During the

week since the SMP released the proposed contract, I have reviewed data and analysis produced so far, and I believe that it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the SMP to demonstrate that its financial plan is sufficiently prudent and risk-free to meet the Council's criteria. The question is not "can the system be built within the constraints of the financing proposed by SMP?" The question is, "SHOULD the system be built?" This is a policy question that goes to the heart of the wisdom of saddling Seattle taxpayers for decades with a tax for a transportation system of limited utility. The alarms raised by state officials have been echoed by the countless phone calls and almost 400 emails I have received this week, which are running some 50 to 1 against approving the project. Almost half of the emails begin with some variant of the phrase: "I voted for the monorail x number of times, but I no longer support it..." including a message from one of the three authors of the 2000 initiative that began the current planning effort.

3. If neither the SMP nor the Council acts to turn down this proposal, the State Legislature has the authority to disband or drastically modify the SMP.

None of these are the kind of choices that elected officials like to make. But it is time for us to face reality and cut our losses before they overwhelm our ability to carry out our critical regional priorities.

Last fall, at the annual meeting of the Transportation Choices Coalition, a member of the regional transportation board in Portland spoke about their success in getting transit projects constructed. Somewhat to the surprise of the audience, one of the things he cited was the decision to scrap a proposed transit line after it became clear that it was not as cost effective as had originally been thought. It is a sign of maturity, he pointed out, to be able to take a stand – and, as a committed transit advocate, to be able to say no to a particular proposal when it doesn't pencil out.

Most of us who live in Seattle have been longing for better transit for years – and continue to be impatient with our progress towards that. But tying up our limited resources for 45 or more years – with enormous profits for the bond market, and great risks to our own fiscal health – for a single system of limited utility, is not progress. As the philosopher Frederic Nietzsche noted: "When you are face to face with an abyss, the only progressive step is backwards." It's time to regroup and seek a better way.